

Iranian ambassador says Zahra Kazemi buried in Iran

Reporters Without Borders today demanded that the body of Canadian-Iranian photo-journalist Zahra Kazemi be exhumed to find out exactly how she died after being arrested last month for photographing Teheran's Evin prison. She died in police hands on 11 July.

The Iranian ambassador to France, Seyed Sadegh Kharazi, told a delegation from the press freedom organisation today that she had been buried in Iran on either the 13 or 14 July but he could not say where. Yesterday however, the Iranian embassy in Canada said a government commission of enquiry set up by President Mohammad Khatami had ordered her not to be buried until the investigation was complete.

"The Iranian vice-president has announced that she was beaten to death, so the authorities were lying when they said she had had a stroke," said Reporters Without Border secretary-general Robert Ménard. "We are appalled to learn from the ambassador in France that she has been buried. How can the official enquiry and legal officials proceed with the case if the body cannot be examined? How can we trust the official autopsy when the authorities at first tried to conceal the cause of her death?"

Robert Ménard said that if the burial was confirmed, the body must be exhumed and returned to Canada or Canadian investigators and pathologists allowed to go to Iran. Such steps were essential in all such cases where a person had been criminally beaten, he noted. Reporters Without Borders has asked the embassy in France to grant visas for its representatives to go to Iran and meet Kazemi's mother and the families of other imprisoned journalists.

The ambassador in France told the press freedom organisation's delegation that Iranian doctors had autopsied the body before burial and that the results had been sent to President Khatami, to the judge in charge of the case and to the government commission of enquiry, made up of the ministers and deputy ministers of justice, the interior, intelligence and Islamic guidance.

Kazemi is thought to have been arrested on 23 June after taking a photo of Evin prison. Four days later she was presented to intelligence ministry officials in a serious state. The authorities then told her family she was in a coma at Teheran's Baghiatollah hospital as a result of a stroke.

After her arrest, police searched her family's home and seized cameras and large sums of money. Canadian officials managed to visit her but were not allowed to see her medical file. Her hospital room was under constant police guard.

Fifteen journalists are believed to be currently held by the Guardians of the Revolution militia at the same place where Kazemi had been interrogated and Reporters Without Borders and their families are worried about their fate. Their relatives have written to President Khatami detailed the physical and psychological torture the prisoners have been subjected to. Their letter appeared today in the reformist Iran press.

With 26 jailed, Iran is currently the world's second biggest prison for journalists.

Reporters Without Borders defends imprisoned journalists and press freedom throughout the world. It has nine national sections (Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland). It has representatives in Bangkok, New York, Tokyo and Washington. And it has more than 120 correspondents worldwide.